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ABSTRACT

To explore why school administrators have only a limited base of knowledge of the laws and cases affecting education, the Informational Resource Questionnaire (IRQ) was designed to study attitudes about legal knowledge. The IRQ focuses on school demographics, which resources administrators most commonly use to obtain both general and legal information, and administrator opinions about how well-versed a particular group should be in school law. From a random sample of 75 school superintendents (Ss), 75 secondary school principals (SPs), and 75 elementary school principals (EPs) in the Massachusetts Public Schools, 142 questionnaires were returned from 59 Ss, 40 SPs, and 43 EPs. Four major findings were: (1) newspapers are often read by school administrators; (2) administrators rely on one another for information; (3) professional organizations at the state level are a more frequent source than are national organizations; and (4) Ss use a wider variety of resources to a greater extent than do principals. The school lawyer was identified as a key person in providing legal knowledge. Pressing issues were teacher evaluation, liability, and special education. Administrators almost unanimously expressed a need for school officials to have some knowledge of education law. The knowledge void existing among administrators is not due to attitudinal indifference. Ten data tables are provided. The IRQ, the cover letter mailed to the study sample, and the followup letter to nonrespondents are appended. (SLD)

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SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' LEGAL KNOWLEDGE: INFORMATION SOURCES AND PERCEIVED NEEDS

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Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association's Annual Meeting, New Orleans, April 1988.

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SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' LEGAL KNOWLEDGE: INFORMATION SOURCES AND PERCEIVED NEEDS

Introduction

The last thirty years have been an era of increased litigation and legislation in the public school arena. Yet one can not assume that the passage of laws and the adjudication of court cases readily institutionalize acceptance and implementation. First, to comply with the law, educators must be aware and knowledgeable of legal mandates (Wasby, 1970). However, the assumption can not be made that legal information is readily known by all school administrators. Quite the contrary.

Zirkel (1985) concluded, after reviewing research studies which had assessed the legal knowledge base of administrators and teachers, "Educators generally evidence serious deficits in their knowledge of various school-related legal issues." Chapman, Sorenson, and Lobosco (1987), in a current study, examined public school administrators' knowledge of recent Supreme Court decisions affecting education. These researchers also found administrators to be lacking in knowledge, especially when applying legal principles to actual situations.

In short, research continually has documented that school administrators possess a limited knowledge base of the laws and cases affecting education. Hence, the problem here is not to add further documentation but to explore reasons why the void exist and subsequently, what steps could be

taken to move toward more legal awareness for administrators. For instance, what available resources are presently accessed by administrators? Could these resources be used more effectively in relaying legal information? Could the problem stem from a belief, on the part of the administrators, that they do not need to possess legal information? Yet if this is not so, and school administrators do desire legal information, what issues are most pressing and what do they look for in a "good" legal resource?

These questions guided this research study. The significance of this study rests with moving forward from the repetitious recording of school officials' limited legal knowledge base to what can be done about it.

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed to obtain information for the present study. An initial draft of the instrument was reviewed by an area superintendent, assistant superintendent, and principal. Based on their recommendations, the questionnaire was revised and expanded to encompass six basic sections (see Appendix A).

School demographics were the focus of the first part. Although Zirkel (1985) found that various demographic factors were not significantly related to the presence or absence of legal knowledge, it was felt that the type of information sources used and the attitude of the school administrator in possessing legal knowledge potentially could be influenced by this data. Consequently, demographic data was gathered on

the size of the school district, community type (urban, suburban, rural), and family socioeconomic level for the area. The respondents also were asked to indicate their job title and years of administrative experience. An additional question was included concerning whether school administrators had ever taken a school law course, and, if yes, to indicate when. The information gathered from this item helped in determining whether education in school law was related to different attitudes or needs.

The second and third sections of the questionnaire explored what resources (newspapers, magazines, journals, other adminstrative personnel, conferences, and so forth) were most commonly used by administrators to obtain both general and legal information. Respondents were asked to rate each information source from "1" (never depend on it) to "5" (always depend on it). Resources used by administrators to procure general information was included to provide a broader and richer data base. Furthermore, in the event that legal resources were accessed infrequently, this data might suggest resource areas where dissemination of legal information could potentially occur.

The school administrators who examined the earlier draft of the questionnaire voiced a common complaint that legal resources may not provide useful information. Therefore, a fourth section was added to explore this area. The question read: "What would you like to get from a good legal source?"

Eleven issues were listed in Section 5 which respondents were asked to rate how "important" or "pressing" were the

issues to them as administrators. The topics listed were ones mentioned by the administrators who critiqued the initial draft of the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to rate each topic from "1" (least pressing) to "5" (most pressing).

The final section of the questionnaire involved four items in which the respondent was asked to check how well-versed a particular group should be in school law. The first item in this section examined superintendents and assistant superintendents; the second--principals; the third--special education directors; and, the fourth--school committees. Respondents could indicate that these separate groups should not be knowledgeable due to other resources being available (e.g., school lawyer), some knowledge was needed (they were asked to list in what areas if they chose this middle level), or, a maximum level of knowledge was needed.

A random sample of 75 superintendents, 75 secondary principals, and 75 elementary principals was taken from the Massachusetts Department of Education's publication listing Massachusetts public schools. A cover letter (Appendix B) and questionnaire was sent to each administrator in the fall of 1987. In December, 1987, a postcard was sent to all nonrespondents to remind them to return the questionnaire. Finally in January, 1988, a followup letter (see Appendix C) and a second copy of the questionnaire were mailed to all remaining nonrespondents. One hundred forty two (142) questionnaires were returned reflecting a 63% return rate.

Results

Demographics

Fifty-nine superintendents (three were assistant superintendents), forty secondary principals, and forty-three elementary principals participated in the study. The majority of the administrators (54.2%) had over 15 years of experience (Table 1). No significant differences were found between years of experience and the administrative position held.

In examining student population (Table 2), type of community (Table 3), and socioeconomic level of the families within the district (Table 4), the overall sampling reflected a wide range of communities. Analyses of variance were conducted to determine whether any significant differences existed among the different subgroups (superintendent, secondary principal, elementary principal) and the community demographics. Results showed that the subgroup of superintendents came from slightly smaller districts and from more rural to suburban communities while the average principal came from a suburban community. With respect to possessing some education in school law, the majority of administrators, regardless of subgroup, had some background (Table 5); however, 58% of the training had occurred over 11 years ago.

General Resources

The most frequently cited printed general resources were newspapers and Education Week (Table 6). The Boston Globe

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Administrators' Level of Experience

Years of Administrative Experience	Frequency	Percentage
under 5	16	11.3
6 - 10	18	12.7
11 - 15	31	21.8
over 15	77	54.2

Table 2

Student Population of School Districts

Student Population	Frequency	Percentage
under 1000	16	11.3
1000-3000	60	42.3
3000-8000	47	33.1
over 8000	18	12.7
no response	1	.7

Table 3

Type of Community in which the School Districts were Found

Type of community	Frequency	Percentage
rural	9	6.3
rural to suburban	23	16.2
suburban	75	52.8
suburban to urban	9	6.3
urban	25	17.6
no response	1	.7

Table 4

Socio-economic Status of the Communities in which the School Districts were Found

Socio-economic Status	Frequency	Percentage
low income	6	4.2
low to middle income	27	19.0
middle income	65	45.8
middle to high income	29	20.4
high income	10	7.0
no response	5	3.5

Table 5

Legal Education Possessed by School Administrators

Level	Frequency	Percentage
JD	2	1.4
Course	108	76.1
Seminar	4	2.8
No legal education	28	19.7

Table 6

Percentage of Total Administrators who "Always" or "Often" Depend on Each Resource for General Information

Resource	Percentage
Newspaper	63.3
Administrators in district	66.2
Education contacts outside district	48.6
Regional Education offices	19.0
Central State Department of Education	10.5
Conferences	43.7
Mass. Association of Superintendents	44.4[1]
Mass. Association of Principals	50.0[2]
Mass. Association of School Committees	35.9[3]
Mass. Teachers Association	31.7
NEA	25.4
National Association of Secondary Principals	35.2[4]
Publications from other Professional Org.	28.2
Education Week	51.4
Educational Leadership	38.7
KAPPAN	36.6
Other Journals	21.9

[1]Mainly superintendents (88.1%) marked this item.

[2]Mainly principals (72.5%=secondary;65.1%=elementary) marked this item.

[3]Mainly superintendents (74.6%) marked this item.

[4]Mainly secondary principals (80%) marked this item.

was the newspaper most mentioned. Outside of these two printed resources which all groups mentioned, superintendents seemed to depend on many of the other printed resources most often although to a less extent than the two already mentioned.

Human resources were used quite often, especially other people within the district who held administrative positions. Of the administrators, 66.2% would look to other administrators within their district for information. Additionally, 48.6% would look outside their district to administrators in other districts. Frequently, principals and superintendents were mentioned for all three subgroups as resources for information.

Professional organizations were accessed mainly by the one subgroup which was most closely related to its purpose. For example, 88.1% of the superintendents "always" or "often" depended on the Massachusetts Association of Superintendents for general information.

In summary, four major trends emerged from the data on general resources:

1. Newspapers, including Education Week, are read often by school administrators.

2. Administrators talk to other administrators and rely on one another for information.

3. Professional organizations on the state level are accessed more than national organizations and these organizations attract primarily their constituents.

4. With all other resources, superintendents utilize a wider variety to a greater extent than principals.

Legal Resources

The most frequently used source of legal information was the school lawyer (Table 7). The next closest resource used was another personal contact--other administrators in the district, followed by school administrators and education contacts outside the district. State associations for principals and superintendents were frequently used by the subgroup for which they were established. Outside of these resources, few were accessed by more than a quarter of the administrators. Three general trends were reflected in the data collected on legal resources:

1. Much legal information for administrators comes from oral sources.

2. The school lawyer is a key person in providing legal information to school administrators.

3. Superintendents use the school lawyer the most, while elementary principals and, to a lesser degree, secondary principals, rely more on obtaining legal information from their colleagues and superiors.

Criteria for a Good Legal Source

Administrators primarily want factual information on the case or piece of legislation and practical guidelines which should be followed to be in compliance with what one can clearly do, clearly not do, and understanding the "gray"

Table 7

Total and Group Percentages of Administrators Who "Always" or "Often" Depend on Each Resource for Legal Information

Resource	Total %	Supt %	Sec. Prin.%	Elem. Prin. %
Newspaper	16.2	13.6	20.0	16.3
Administrators in district	40.9	32.2	42.5	51.1
Education contacts outside district	38.8	55.9	22.5	30.3
School Lawyer	58.4	94.9	35.0	30.2
School Board	14.1	20.4	10.0	9.3
Regional education offices	29.6	32.2	32.5	23.3
State Department of Education	25.3	39.0	15.0	16.3
Conferences	24.7	40.6	17.5	9.3
Mass. Assoc. of School Supt.	34.5	78.0	5.0	2.3
Mass. Assoc. of Principals	33.8	18.7	37.5	51.2
MASC Legal File	35.9	76.3	5.0	9.3
NOLPE	12.6	25.4	7.5	0.0
Mass. Teachers Association	18.4	17.0	10.0	28.0
NEA	18.4	15.3	10.0	30.2
Natl' Assoc. of Sec. Principals	25.4	13.6	62.5	7.0
Other publications	12.6	20.4	10.0	4.6
Education Week	28.2	37.2	27.5	16.3
Educational Leadership	17.6	25.4	15.0	9.3

Table 7 (continued)

Resource	Total %	Supt. %	Sec. Prin. %	Elem. Prin. %
KAPPAN	21.8	28.8	10.0	23.3
Other Journals	9.8	15.3	7.5	4.7
Books	11.2	11.9	10.0	11.4
Other	7.0	13.6	0.0	4.6

area/s defined (Table 8). Identifying the ambiguities with the possible risks involved in taking a particular action also was identified as a strong need by 69% of the administrators.

A chi-square analysis was generated to determine if any significant differences existed among the answers of the three subgroups. No significance differences were found. In short, all groups basically felt the same in what they would like to obtain from a good legal source.

Further chi-square analyses were conducted to examine whether any significant differences existed as to what administrators would like from a legal source and the various demographic variables.

Years of experience seemed to make a difference with whether an administrator desired factual information (χ^2 = 10.38, p=.016). Adminstrators with more experience were more likely to want factual information. Results approaching significance were found in analyzing the desire to know what experts are hypothesizing with years of experience (χ^2 =6.70, p=.08). Again, adminstrators with more years of experience wished to have this information.

Significant differences were found between size of school and two items: factual information and the history leading up to the case. Middle size schools (3000 to 8000 students) were more likely to desire factual information (χ^2 =8.17, p=.04), and smaller schools (3000 and under) expressed a stronger desire to know the history leading up to the case or law (χ^2=11.75, p.008).

Table 8

Administrators Perceptions of What Should Be Included in a Good Legal Source

Information	Percentage Marking "Yes"
Factual information on the case or piece of legislation	83.1
The history leading up to the case or law	45.8
What groups were lobbying for the law	27.5
What experts are hypothesizing as to the impact of the case's decision or the piece of legislation on the schools	54.9
Practical guidelines that should be followed to be in compliance with the case law or piece of legislation	87.3
What one can clearly do, clearly not do, and the "gray" area defined	84.5
The ambiguities identified with the possible risks involved in taking a particular action which could fall in this "gray" area	69.0
Other, written in criteria included: .what has happened in other districts .legal precedents .what staff training should occur by a school lawyer .any contractual language implications	3.5

An analysis examining rural-suburban-urban setting yielded significant differences on item 7 concerning the need to have ambiguities identified (χ^2=11.21, p=.02). Suburban schools felt a stronger need for information on the ambiguities involved in a case or law.

Finally, in contrasting administrators who have some background in school law with those who do not, only one analysis involving the desire for factual information came close to reflecting significant results (χ^2=2.85, p=.09). Administrators with some training in school law were more likely to desire factual information on a case or law.

Pressing Legal Issues

The three top pressing issues for administrators as a total group were teacher evaluation, liability, and special education (Table 9). Note, however, that within the subgroups different issues seemed to take precedent. For elementary principals, AIDS and disciplining subordinates were very pressing for 50% of the respondents. These two issues were not nearly as pressing for superintendents and secondary principals. With superintendents, environmental regulations and school finance were rated much higher than with the other two groups.

Analyses of variance were conducted on the data to determine if significant differences existed between the position an administrator held and how pressing an issue was. Significant results were found with AIDS (F=3.115, p=.011), environmental regulations (F=6.388, p=.002), and school

Table 9

Total and Group Percentages of Administrators Who Felt Issues were Very Pressing (marked "4" or "5" on scale)

Issue	Total %	Supt. %	Sec. Prin. %	Elem. Prin. %
AIDS	32.4	27.1	20.0	51.2
Due Process & suspension/ expulsion	23.9	15.3	30.0	30.2
Environmental regulations	27.5	44.0	15.0	16.3
Teacher Evaluation	52.1	44.0	57.5	58.2
Hazing	2.1	1.7	2.5	2.3
Liability	59.9	54.2	55.0	72.1
Religion	8.4	8.5	5.0	11.6
Disciplining subordinates	35.9	30.5	30.0	48.9
School Finance	24.7	35.6	12.5	21.0
Special Education	48.6	57.6	40.0	44.2
Student Rights	25.3	18.7	22.5	37.2
Other, listed as follows: .parents rights .contractual imperatives .medical aid issues .labor law .desegregation .affirmative action .teacher dismissal .paraprofessional rights .civil rights	5.6	8.5	0.0	7.0

finance (F=4.684, p=.011). With one issue, special education, the statistical analysis indicated that the results were approaching significance (F=2.441, p=.091). Thus, although three major issues were reflected overall (teacher evaluation, liability, and special education), topics of importance were tied somewhat with the administrative position a respondent held. Consequently, different level administrators will have different legal issues pressing on them.

Chi-square analyses were used to explore whether any significant differences existed between what issues were pressing and the various demographic variables.

Years of experience seemed to impact on three issues: AIDS; due process and student suspension/expulsion; and, religion and education. In examining AIDS with years of experience, significant differences were found (χ^2=24.96, p=.05), yet the results are difficult to interpret. Administrators with 6 to 10 years or over 15 years of experience did not feel this issue was as strongly pressing as those administrators with under five years or 11-15 years of experience. With due process and student suspension/expulsion, the significant results (χ^2=21.83, p=.04) indicated that administrators with less than ten years experience saw this issue as more pressing. A similar, yet more narrow, interpretation can be made with religion and education where the results (χ^2 =29.37, p=.003) show more administrators with less than five years experience as rating this issue as most pressing.

Size reflected significant differences with environmental regulations (χ^2 =24.44, p=.017). Smaller schools (under 3000) seem to find this issue more pressing. This result may reflect, however, the slightly larger number of superintendents who were from smaller schools since this issue on a whole was rated as more pressing by superintendents.

Whether an administrator had any background in school law made a difference with several issues. With the rights of the school administrator in disciplining subordinates, significant differences were found between administrators who had some law background and those who did not (χ^2 =9.58, p=.05). More administrators with course background in school law would rate this issue "medium" to "somewhat" pressing as opposed to those without any background would rate it "a little" to "medium" pressing. The opposite was found with the students' rights issue where significant differences were also found between the ratings and the administrators' background (χ^2 =9.29, p=.05). Administrators with background in school law were less likely to use the rating of "most pressing" than those administrators who had no background.

Need for School Officials to be Legally Knowledgeable

Almost 90% of all respondents felt that superintendents (including assistant superintendents), principals, and special education directors should have some knowledge of school law (Table 10). Of this 90%, notice that over 50% of the respondents marked that superintendents and special education directors should possess maximum knowledge--all

Table 10

Standard of Knowledge Adminstrators Felt School Officials Need

School Official	No Knowledge Needed	Some Standard Needed	Maximum Knowledge	No Response
Superintendent/Assist. Superintendent	7.0%	36.6%	52.8%	3.5%
Principal	6.3%	61.3%	28.2%	4.2%
Special Education Director	1.4%	37.3%	57.0%	4.2%
School Committee	32.4%	47.2%	18.3%	2.1%

there is to know. School committees were not judged as hard, but still, 65.5% felt even school committees should possess some legal knowledge.

Chi-square analyses showed no significant differences between any of the subgroups and the responses to any of these four items. Despite no significant differences, a trend was found that the elementary principal subgroup in all four instances reflected the greatest percentage who felt a maximum level of knowledge was needed. Superintendents, in all four items, reflected the lowest percentage who felt a maximum level of knowledge was needed. Secondary principals fell inbetween.

With those respondents who indicated some standard was needed, a request was made to identify those areas in which the official should be familiar with school law. A wide range of topics was given. One interesting note is that the responding superintendents generated a list for each item three times as long as both principals' lists. Topics most repeated for how well versed a superintendent should be were liability, teacher evaluation, knowing where to obtain legal help, special education, school finance, and students' rights. For principals, evaluation, students' rights, liability, special education, and due process were the topics most mentioned. The special education director mainly drew comments pertaining to the need to know special education law, yet students' rights was specifically identified many times. Last, the school committee drew various topics with few repeats other than three mentions of school finance

(including collective bargaining) and liability issues.

In short, over 20 topics were listed for the special education director and school committee; over 30 for superintendent and principal. For this sample of respondents, there is no doubt that the majority felt that school administrators should possess knowledge in educational law.

Chi square analyses were implemented to investigate whether any significant differences existed between how well versed administrators felt various school officials should be and the demographic variables assessed. Only one significant result emerged. With rural-suburban-urban type, significant differences were found as to how well versed the respondents felt school committees should be (χ^2 =23.28, p=.003). As schools become more urban, a higher standard of knowledge is felt to be important for school committees.

Two results approached significance and involved whether or not an administrator had any background in school law. With assessing a principal's desired standard of knowledge, a larger percent of administrators who had some legal coursework tended to indicate that a maximum level was needed for principals (χ^2 =4.82, p=.089). With school committees, similar trends were indicated (χ^2=4.64, p=.098), but at one standard lower. With some coursework in law, almost twice the percentage of administrators were apt to feel that school committees should possess some standard of legal knowledge as compared with those adminstrators with no background in school law.

Discussion

The primary impetus of this study was to explore why the knowledge void in school law might exist among school administrators. Furthermore, it was hoped that from the descriptive data, recommendations could be generated to better meet the needs of administrators in obtaining legal information. Thus, this section first will focus on possible reasons why the knowledge void exists, followed by recommendations to reduce it.

One possible explanation for the knowledge void, namely that administrators do not believe legal information is important, has been refuted by this research. Almost unanimously, administrators voiced a need for school officials to have some knowledge of education law. Hence, a recognition of the worth of possessing school law information is present.

A more plausible explanation can be generated by the additional comments which a few administrators added at the end of their questionnaire. These administrators wrote that although they felt that all school officials should have some knowledge of school law issues, it was impossible to keep up-to-date. The lack of knowledge in school law then could be due not to an attitudinal indifference, but to an issue of having the time to stay current.

Along with a time constraint, administrators may feel even more limited by a lack of easily accessible legal resources. It is clear from this research that administra-

tors are particular as to what issues are pressing for them and what information they desire from a legal resource. A knowledge void could exist then, because the resources available do not meet the needs of the administrators by not examining issues which are important to them or by not covering the information for which they are looking. In this manner, what legal resources are available remain useless in the eyes of the administrator.

Another explanation could be that administrators do not know how to obtain school law information--they are unaware of the available resources. It seems, though, that this possibility is unlikely given that around 80% have had some training in school law. Yet can one assume that school law training will include a component on the process of obtaining legal information as well as the content? Perhaps this critical information is overlooked by school law educators in the process of covering an enormous amount of information within a constrained timetable.

From this study, the data do demonstrate that very limited legal resources are tapped and of these resources most involve oral forms of transmitting information. School administrators within the district or within neighboring districts were the most depended upon resource for legal information. School lawyers, too, were mentioned frequently but primarily by superintendents. Professional organizations and conferences were mentioned, but mostly superintendents were the ones attending these meetings. When these results are taken along with the fact that superintendents were found

to be interested in different topics from principals, some insight can be gleaned as to why a knowledge void might occur with school administrators. An in-house information system may be functioning with many school systems in which administrators obtain information from other administrators. This system could work if a concerted effort is made by one person (e.g., the superintendent) to keep up-to-date. Yet it would require, for instance, the superintendent to have new legal information in all areas, including those areas which are pressing for principals, and then transmitting this information to all other school officials. Hence, this job places a great deal of responsibility on one person.

In summary, the knowledge void which exists among school administrators is not due to an attitudinal indifference. Several other explanations are more likely, based on the data gathered. First, dissemination of legal knowledge could be hampered by a time constraint. Second, the legal resources which are available may not meet the needs of administrators, therefore these resources may not be tapped. Third, legal information may be limited because school administrators may not know how to access the available resources. Fourth, because school administrators primarily depend on oral forms of obtaining information, the information that is transmitted is extremely limited.

Basically, the good news is that legal information is valued among administrators. The bad news is that several barriers could be operating to reduce the possibility of

legal information reaching the needed officials. Nevertheless, given any of the hypothesized barriers, several recommendations can be made to move in the direction of narrowing the knowledge void which currently exists.

One recommendation stems from the result that almost all administrators read a national newspaper (e.g., Boston Globe), but marked that they did not depend on it for legal information. As one respondent mentioned when listing the Boston Globe under legal resource, "I question its validity though." This attitude is reflected in rating newspapers very low in obtaining legal information. Yet Chapman et al (1987) found that newspapers were an accurate source of factual information concerning recent Supreme Court decisions. Since factual information was mentioned by respondents as one of the most important elements to have present in a legal resource, school officials need to be made aware that this resource can be depended upon.

A second recommendation revolves around state professional organization meetings or conferences. The data from this study show that these organizations provide a common meeting place for many school officials. This time could be tapped by organizations who publish legal information to display material or sponsor presentations. In this manner, more administrators could be reached and, since many depend on other administrators for their information, a ripple effect could result.

Yet a third recommendation should be followed in conjunction with the second. Having legal information

available is not enough. This study demonstrated that school administrators have specific criteria which they hope to find in any legal resource whether it be in a written form or oral form. Basically, they desire a legal source to provide factual information on the case or piece of legislation, practical guidelines which should be followed to be in compliance, and an articulation of the "gray" area/s. If a matchup does not occur then that resource will be ineffective. Consequently, at conferences, workshops, or in printed articles whose target audience is school officials, an effort should be made whenever possible to cover these points.

Additionally, in this study, it was found that there are particular legal issues which administrators feel most pressing. Resources which address these issues will be of greater value. However, caution is needed in that different issues were of importance to superintendents, secondary principals, and elementary principals. Also, to a certain extent, the size of the district and the urban-rural setting seemed to impact on what issues were pressing. Yet since many principals depend on their superintendent for legal information, too much focus on limiting issues to the audience at hand (superintendent vs. principal; small vs. large; rural vs. urban) could contribute to a breakdown of information. Especially with superintendents, emphasis should be given to be as knowledgeable as possible in all areas. Furthermore, superintendents may need help in learning how to best transmit information accurately and efficiently to others, since oral relaying of information

seemed most used by principals. School lawyers, too, need to be aware that they are pivotal players in transmitting accurate and timely legal information to superintendents who, in turn, provide this information to others.

Finally, recommendations can be generated concerning school law courses and inservice training. Those respondents who had some background in school law were more likely to value the need for legal information. This fact by itself supports the need for coursework or inservice in this area. Yet even though eighty percent of the respondents had some form of legal information training, either through a school law course or through a workshop, few accessed the available legal resources. It may be that content is not enough. The process of obtaining legal information may need to be emphasized. How does one stay current? What legal resources are available? Given that the majority had received their training over 11 years ago, the process may be more important to focus on than the content. Workshop and conference presenters as well as school law professors need to incorporate the teaching of how to stay current in this area as well as the content, since this may be the last contact made for a decade or more. Of course, in addition, an argument could be made to require periodic legal updatings for administrators. Yet passing certification or licensing requirements is a difficult avenue to pursue. This idea, nevertheless, is a possibility.

In conclusion, as professionals committed to the value and need for legal information, this research study provides many guidelines in working toward this goal. It is reassuring that administrators feel school officials should have some education law background. Nevertheless, how this information will find its way into the hands of school administrators has yet to be effectively accomplished. This study has provided a base from which recommendations have been generated to move toward meeting this goal. Clearly, more research is needed in this area. However, it is imperative that the thrust of future research should not be to document that a knowledge void exists, but to work toward what can be done to eliminate it.

References

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APPENDIX A:

INFORMATIONAL RESOURCE QUESTIONNAIRE

INFORMATIONAL RESOURCE QUESTIONNAIRE

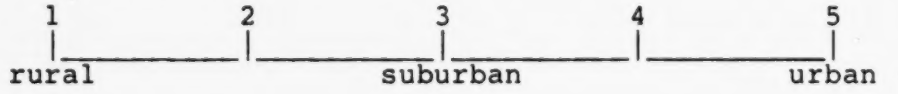
I. **Demographics:**

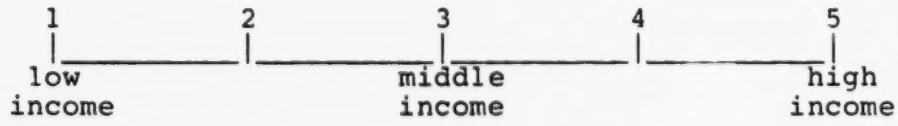
1. What is your position?
   a. Superintendent
   b. Assistant Superintendent
   c. Principal, junior high, middle school, high school
   d. Principal, elementary school
   e. Other (please specify) _____

2. How many years have you served as a school administrator?
   a. under 5 years
   b. 6-10 years
   c. 11-15 years
   d. over 15 years

3. What is the size of your school district?
   a. total students in district under 1000
   b. total students in district between 1000 and 3000
   c. total students in district between 3000 and 8000
   d. total students in district over 8000

4. In your opinion, circle the number which best describes the type of community you serve. (NOTE: If you are a principal relate this to the community your school serves. If you are an Assistant Superintendent or Superintendent try to come up with the average type reflected by all the communities you serve--if you indeed serve more than one.)





5. Have you ever taken a school law course? YES or NO
   If yes, approximately what year was it taken?_____

II. **How frequently do you read or <u>initiate</u> a contact with the following general resources?** (At this point, you are not being asked about where you obtain your legal information, but instead what resources you access most frequently.)

A "1" indicates you <u>never</u> have contact;
a "2" indicates you <u>seldom</u> have contact;
a "3" indicates you <u>sometimes</u> have contact;
a "4" indicates you <u>often</u> have contact; and,
a "5" indicates you <u>always</u> have contact with the resource listed. Circle the number which best indicates your frequency of contact.

1 2 3 4 5 Newspapers, please specify and rate each one if the ratings would differ_____
_____
_____

1 2 3 4 5 Other administrators in your district, specify only their position and rate each one if the ratings would differ_____
_____
_____

1 2 3 4 5 Other school administrators or educational contacts, please specify only their position and rate each one if the ratings would differ_____
_____
_____

1 2 3 4 5 Regional Offices of the State Department of Education (you initiate the contact, not contact due to required reports)

1 2 3 4 5 Massachusetts State Department of Education in Quincy (you initiate the contact, not contact due to required reports)

1 2 3 4 5 Conferences, please specify the ones you attend and rate each one if the ratings would differ _____
_____
_____

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from the Mass. Assoc. of School Superintendents

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from the Mass. Assoc. of Elementary and/or Secondary School Principals

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from the Mass. Assoc. of School Committees

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from MTA

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from NEA

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from National Assoc. Secondary School Principals

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from other professional organizations, please specify and rate each one if the ratings would differ_____
_____
_____

1 2 3 4 5 Education Week

1 2 3 4 5 Educational Leadership

1 2 3 4 5 Kappan

1 2 3 4 5 Other Journals or Magazines (not necessarily within the area of education), please specify _____
_____
_____

III. **To what degree do you depend on each resource listed below for valid and timely <u>legal</u> information.**

A "1" indicates you <u>never</u> depend on it;
a "2" indicates you <u>seldom</u> depend on it;
a "3" indicates you <u>sometimes</u> depend on it;
a "4" indicates you <u>often</u> depend on it; and,
a "5" indicates you <u>always</u> depend on it.

Circle the number which best indicates the extent of your dependency.

1 2 3 4 5 Newspaper, please specify the title if you mark this 3 or above_____

1 2 3 4 5 Other administrators in your district, please specify their position and rate each one if the ratings would be different
_____
_____

1 2 3 4 5 Other local administrators or personal legal contacts (other than your school's lawyer) please specify their position and rate each one if the ratings would be different_____
_____
_____

1 2 3 4 5 School lawyer

1 2 3 4 5 Members of the School Board or Committee

1 2 3 4 5 Regional Offices of the State Department of Education

1 2 3 4 5 Massachusetts State Department of Education in Quincy

1 2 3 4 5 Conferences, please specify only if you rate this 3 or above. Also if more than one, please rate each one if the ratings would differ_____
_____

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from the Mass. Assoc. of School Supt.

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from the Mass. Assoc. of Elementary and/or Secondary School Principals

1 2 3 4 5 Mass. Assoc. of School Committees (MASC) Legal File

1 2 3 4 5 National Organization on Legal Problems in Education (NOLPE) publications

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from MTA

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from NEA

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from Nat'l Assoc. of Secondary School Principals

1 2 3 4 5 Publications from other professional organizations, please specify only if this is rated 3 or above. Also rate each one if the ratings would differ_____

_____

_____

1 2 3 4 5 Education Week

1 2 3 4 5 Educational Leadership

1 2 3 4 5 Kappan

1 2 3 4 5 Other Journals or Magazines, please specify only if rated 3 or above. Also rate each one if the ratings would differ

_____

_____

1 2 3 4 5 Books, please specify only if rated 3 or above. Also rate each one if the ratings would differ _____

_____

1 2 3 4 5 Any other resource not covered above, please specify only if rated 3 or above. Also rate each one if the ratings would differ _____

_____

IV. **What would you like to get from a good legal source?** Circle as many choices as you feel applies and also indicate any other criteria which you feel is important.

a. factual information on the case or piece of legislation
b. the history leading up to the case or law
c. what groups were lobbying for the law
d. what experts are hypothesizing as to the impact of the case's decision or the piece of legislation on the schools
e. practical guidelines that should be followed to be in compliance with the case law or piece of legislation
f. what you can clearly do, clearly not do, and the "gray" area defined
g. the ambiguities identified with the possible risks involved in taking a particular action which would fall in this "gray" area
h. other, please specify _____

_____

_____

V. **What legal issues are most pressing for you at this time?**
("1" being least pressing and "5" being most pressing)

1 2 3 4 5 AIDS
1 2 3 4 5 Due Process and Student Suspension/Expulsion
1 2 3 4 5 Environmental Regulations (e.g., Asbestos)
1 2 3 4 5 Evaluation of Teachers
1 2 3 4 5 Hazing

1 2 3 4 5 Liability Issues
1 2 3 4 5 Religion and Education
1 2 3 4 5 Rights of School Administrators in Disciplining Subordinates
1 2 3 4 5 School Finance
1 2 3 4 5 Special Education
1 2 3 4 5 Student Rights
1 2 3 4 5 Other, please specify _____
1 2 3 4 5 Other, please specify _____

VI. How well versed do you feel a superintendent or assistant superintendent should be in legal issues relating to education?

a. does not need to be--other resources are available if needed (e.g., school lawyer)
b. some standard is needed--basic legal information should be possessed in the following areas _____
_____
_____
c. a maximum level is needed--a superintendent or asst. superintendent should be on top of all legal issues relating to education

VII. How well versed do you feel a principal should be in legal issues relating to education?

a. does not need to be--other resources are available if needed (e.g., superintendent, assist. supt., school lawyer)
b. some standard is needed--basic legal information should be possessed in the following areas _____
_____
_____
c. a maximum level is needed--a principal should be on top of all legal issues relating to education

VIII. How well versed do you feel a Special Education Director should be in legal issues relating to education?

a. does not need to be--other resources are available if needed (e.g., superintendent, assist. supt., school lawyer)
b. some standard is needed--basic legal information should be possessed in the following areas _____
_____
_____
c. a maximum level is needed--a SPED director should be on top of all legal issues relating to education

IX. **How well versed do you feel a School Committee or School Board should be in legal issues relating to education?**

a. does not need to be--other resources are available if needed
b. some standard is needed--basic legal information should be possessed in the following areas _____
_____
_____
c. a maximum level is needed--a school committee/board should be on top of all legal issues relating to education

X. **Do you have any other comments or concerns that you would like to share?**

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. IF THE ENCLOSED ENVELOPE IS MISPLACED, PLEASE RETURN THIS SURVEY TO:

Dr. Susan J. Hillman
Education Department
North Adams State College
North Adams, Massachusetts 01247

APPENDIX B:

COVER LETTER TO ADMINISTRATORS

north adams state college
north adams, massachusetts 01247

November 18, 1987

Dear Administrator:

Many research studies have investigated the knowledge school administrators possess concerning school law issues. The majority of these examinations have concluded that a deficiency in school law information exists among school officials. Little follow up has been conducted, however, to determine how school administrators perceive the need to be current on legal issues or if they rely on other resources. Furthermore, it would be helpful to explore what informational resources (not necessarily a legal resource, but any resource) are frequently used by school administrators. This information could be used to identify resources which could be tapped to provide accurate and up-to-date legal information.

I am writing to ask your cooperation in obtaining information about what sources you access most frequently and particularly which legal sources you use to learn about developments in school law. It also will be helpful to learn your opinion concerning the need to stay "legally current."

Over one hundred administrators throughout Massachusetts will be participating in this study. You were one of the hundred randomly selected. All responses will be aggregated together. No individual respondent will be identified, neither will a list of the respondents or their school systems be mentioned. Complete anonymity is guaranteed. The results of this study will be reported at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in April. The findings also will be shared with the National Organization of Legal Problems in Education (NOLPE) of which I am a member. As NOLPE works to disseminate information on school legal issues, this study will help tremendously.

I encourage you to take the fifteen minutes needed to fill out the attached questionnaire and return it in the envelope provided by December 8. If you would like a copy of the results, please indicate so. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Susan J. Hillman, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor

APPENDIX C:

FOLLOWUP LETTER TO NONRESPONDENTS

north adams state college
north adams, massachusetts 01247

January 6, 1988

Dear Administrator:

In November of last year you were asked to participate in a study which I am conducting. This investigation deals with what resources school administrators access to obtain general knowledge as well as legal information. In addition, the study is exploring how administrators perceive the need to be current on legal issues.

As of this writing, I have not received your completed questionnaire. Realizing that I might have caught you at a busy time of the year, I am enclosing a second copy of the questionnaire for your consideration. I would greatly appreciate if you would complete this instrument and forward it to me at your earliest convenience. I am hoping that all completed questionnaires will be returned by January 15.

If you have any questions or if it would be more convenient for me to conduct this survey over the phone, I would be happy to meet this request if notified.

Sincerely,

Susan J. Hillman

Susan J. Hillman, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor